

The Consolations of Philosophy
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
August 17, 2008

Philosophy is not something that people think about or talk about very often, yet our philosophy guides our expectations and offers valuable insights for responding when our expectations are not met. In a delightful book called *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton summarizes how different philosophers have responded to unpopularity, to not having enough money, to frustration, to inadequacy, to a broken heart, and to difficulties, in general.

The Stoic philosopher Seneca suggests how we might live with frustration. Seneca lived in Rome until he was ordered to kill himself by Emperor Nero in the year 65 of the Common Era. Throughout his life, Seneca faced and witnessed disasters. For him, philosophy was a discipline to assist human beings in overcoming conflicts between their wishes and reality. He believed that we best endure those frustrations which we have prepared ourselves for and understand, and we are hurt most by those frustrations we least expected and cannot understand. Philosophy must reconcile us to the true dimensions of reality, and so spare us, if not frustration itself, then at least philosophy must spare us from the most distressing emotions which accompany frustration.¹

Life is full of our wishes colliding with reality, so frustration is ordinary and common. In Seneca's view, the sources of our anger when we are frustrated are dangerously optimistic ideas about what the world and other people are like. We will cease to be so angry once we cease to be so hopeful. Seneca's philosophy is more nuanced than this, but in essence he says that because we are injured most by what we do not expect, and because anything can happen, including disasters, we must hold the possibility of disaster in mind. Stoicism is a form of detachment which advises us not to become too emotionally invested in our desired outcome.

Let us move on to the philosophical consolation for unpopularity. The consolation for unpopularity offered to us by Socrates is that the world is more flexible than it seems. "The

¹ The facts about the six philosophers and the analysis of their points of view are found in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton, Pantheon Books, New York, 2000.

established views have frequently emerged not through a process of faultless reasoning, but through centuries of intellectual muddle. There may be no good reason for things to be the way they are.”² Or, to make the point more simply in this “bar joke,” 137 lemmings walk into a bar .

..

Ouch.

Ouch.

Ouch.

Ouch.

Ouch.

Ouch . . .

And so on until the last lemming walked into the bar.³

Regarding the philosophical consolation for not having enough money, we look to Epicurus, who was born in the year 341 Before the Common Era. For him, philosophy, properly understood, was a guide to pleasure. At the core of Epicureanism is the belief that we are not very good at figuring out what makes us happy, yet philosophy is useless if it does not reduce mental suffering. Through experience and insight, Epicurus devised three categories of desires -- desires that are mandatory for happiness, optional for happiness, and not necessary for happiness.⁴

Mandatory for happiness

Friends

Freedom

Time to reflect upon our anxieties about death, illness, and poverty

Vegetarian food, shelter, and clothes

Optional for happiness

Big house

Pool and spa (we would call it a hot tub)

Banquets

Servants

Fish and meat

² Ibid., p. 23.

³ See <http://www.netfunny.com/rhf/jokes/95q4/lemmings.html>.

⁴ *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton, Pantheon Books, New York, 2000, p 60.

Not necessary for happiness

Fame

Power

So having a lot of money is optional for happiness, but if we do not take the time to reflect upon our anxious thoughts – to watch how our mind works – and if we do not have friends, freedom, and our basic bodily needs met, we cannot be happy. It may seem counterintuitive that to reflect upon our worry is a way toward happiness. I'm guessing that the mechanism here is to give our worries fresh air and daylight instead of letting them drive our frenzied actions.

Moving on to the philosophical consolation for inadequacy, the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne guides us. Montaigne was born in 1533 and died in 1592. He saw misplaced confidence in reason as a big problem which, among other things, contributed to our frequent sense of inadequacy. According to Montaigne, we are far from being the rational, serene creatures which Socrates, Seneca, Epicurus and other ancient philosophers thought we could be. “We [are] for the most part hysterical and demented, gross and agitated souls . . . And yet if we accepted our frailties, and ceased claiming a mastery we did not have, we [stand] to find . . . that we [are] ultimately still adequate in our own distinctive half-wise, half-blockheadedish way.”⁵ The art of living lies in finding uses for our adversities, according to Montaigne.

Now we consider the philosophical consolation for a broken heart. Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the greatest pessimists in the history of philosophy. He was born in 1788 and died in 1860. According to Schopenhauer, “We can regard our life as a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of nothingness,” and “It is bad today and every day it will get worse, until the worst of all happens.”⁶ Can you imagine his love life and what he thought of it? At age 33, he began an intermittent 10-year relationship with Caroline Medon, a singer who was then 19 years old. He did not want to formalize the relationship. “To marry means to do everything possible to become an object of disgust to each other,” he wrote. By age 45, his closest relationships were with a succession of poodles, who he felt had a gentleness and humility that humans lack.

⁵ *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton, Pantheon Books, New York, 2000, p 60, p. 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Shortly before his death at age 72, Schopenhauer wrote, “I can bear the thought that in a short time worms will eat away my body; but the idea of philosophy professors nibbling at my philosophy makes me shudder.” His contribution to the consolation of philosophy was to highlight the human will, specifically the will-to-life, as distinct from reason. Look at human experience as a whole, Schopenhauer advises, and adjust your expectations accordingly. Or, to make the point more simply, as American actress Joan Crawford said, “Love is a fire. But whether it is going to warm your heart or burn down your house, you can never tell.”

Finally, we hear from Friedrich Nietzsche on the philosophical consolation for difficulties in general. Nietzsche was a German philosopher who was born in 1844 and died in 1900. He wrote, “Let us assume that people will be *allowed* to read [my work] in about the year 2000 . . . It seems to me that to take a book of mine into his hands is one of the rarest distinctions that anyone can confer upon himself. I even assume that he removes his shoes when he does so – not to speak of boots.”⁷

His basic message is this: Difficulties of every sort are to be welcomed by those seeking fulfillment. As a 21-year-old, he had chanced to pick up a book by Schopenhauer in a bookstore (Schopenhauer had died five years before). Schopenhauer had advised that since fulfillment is an illusion, we should avoid pain rather than seek pleasure. We should live in a “small fireproof room.” In contrast, Nietzsche said fulfillment was to be reached not by avoiding pain but by recognizing its role as a natural, inevitable step on the way to reaching anything good. “Live dangerously!” wrote Nietzsche.⁸ Not everything which makes us feel better is good for us. Not everything which hurts may be bad. Or, to make the point more simply, “If you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning.”⁹

I conclude these remarks on consolation with a poem by Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet:

⁷ Ibid., p. 205.

⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

⁹ Quote by Catherine Aird.

“This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep our house
empty of its furniture.

Still treat each guest honorably,
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

May we meet all visitors of thought and feeling at the door laughing. Given our place in the vast panorama of life, we need all the allies that we can get. Joy, depression, meanness, a crowd of sorrows – each one of them may be allies. May it be so!